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In the years after her first husband, Joffrey de Peyrac, was sentenced to death by burning, beautiful, emerald-eyed Angélique lived many lives: she was cast penniless into the Paris underworld; she became the mistress of great wealth and married again; she held King Louis XIV's heart in thrall. But she could never forget the scarred nobleman whom she knew as the gentlest and wisest of lovers, and, when the King reveals that Joffrey was spared execution and later escaped his guards, she knows that she will make any sacrifice to find him.

Angélique embarks upon a voyage of discovery which takes her to the wildest coasts of the Mediterranean Sea. The clues lead her from Marseilles to Candia, blood-soaked centre of the slave-trade, to Algiers and the fabled harems of Morocco. Shipwrecked, sold to Rescator, masked prince of the pirates, given to the Grand Eunuch of the Sultan Mulai Ismail, cruellest and most fanatical of the sons of Mohammed, Angélique is sustained only by her great love and by the devotion she inspires in men as diverse as the courtly Admiral de Vivonne and the rough, proud slave, Colin Paturel.

BOOKS BY  
SERGEANNE COLON

*Angélique*

*Angélique and the King*

*Angélique and the Sultan*

SERGEANNE GOLON

*Angélique and the Sultan*

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## CAST OF CHARACTERS

The action of this novel covers less than a year's time and commences in the early 1670's.

Following is a list of the principal characters, including those who play a small part or are merely mentioned in this novel, but who figured in previous episodes of Angélique's life. Those marked with an asterisk are known more or less prominently to history.

*Angélique.* Born Angélique de Sancé de Monteloup, of a family of the minor nobility in Poitou, she first married Comte Joffrey de Peyrac of Toulouse, Prince of Aquitaine, of the Palace of Gay Learning. Joffrey, a remarkably brilliant and powerful man, was condemned to the stake by Louis XIV on a trumped-up charge of sorcery, and was supposedly executed in February 1661. Reduced to extreme poverty, Angélique became a member of the Paris underworld, the rendezvous of which was the Court of Miracles in the Saint-Denis quarter of Paris. Later, under the name of Madame Morens, she opened a chocolate shop with David Chaillou, whereby she made a great deal of money which she invested shrewdly, becoming extremely rich, and a member of the literary society of Paris. Having been in love with her cousin Philippe, Marquis du Plessis-Belliére, since they were both adolescents, she more or less blackmailed him into marrying her, thus gaining a position in the high nobility of France. She became a shrewd adviser and trusted confidante of Louis XIV and his Minister of Finance, Colbert, and one of the leading members of Louis's brilliant Court at Versailles. The King's attentions to her involved her in a fierce rivalry with his mistress, Madame de Montespan. Louis XIV was deeply in love with Angélique, but she resisted his advances and fled the Court, thus incurring the King's grave displeasure.

*Cantor.* Angélique's younger son by her first husband, Joffrey de Peyrac. He went as a page on the expedition of the Duc de Vivonne to Sicily, where he disappeared in the pirate Rescator's attack on the French fleet off Cape Passero.

*Charles-Henri.* Angélique's son by Philippe du Plessis-Belliére.

*Daisy-Valina.\** The English-born queen of Mulai Ismail, Sultan of Morocco.

*David (Chaillou).* Angélique's partner in her chocolate shop business.

*Desgrez, François.* Lieutenant of the Paris police. He had acted as

defence attorney for Joffrey de Peyrac, and had been much in love with Angélique during her days of poverty.

*Escrainville, Marquis d'*. The younger son of an impoverished family of the minor nobility, who had his career as a young diplomat ruined by amorous intrigue, and turned pirate.

*Fatima-Mirelia*. A woman from Marseilles who had been captured in her youth by Moorish pirates, and after many years of slavery now served Angélique as a companion and waiting woman.

*Flipot*. Angélique's lackey. A friend from her Court of Miracles days.

*Florimond*. Angélique's elder son by Joffrey de Peyrac. A page in the household of Monsieur, brother of King Louis XIV, at Saint-Cloud.

*Great Coesre*. A legless, loathsome cripple who reigned as King of the Paris underworld in the Court of Miracles, and was once a protector of Angélique, who subsequently stabbed him.

*Gutter Poet*. A vagabond ballad-singer whom Angélique knew in the Court of Miracles.

*Javotte*. Angélique's maid. One of her friends from her Court of Miracles days.

*Joffrey de Peyrac*. Comte de Toulouse and Prince of Aquitaine, Angélique's first husband.

*Leïla Aisheh*. The chief wife of Mulai Ismail, Sultan of Morocco.

*Lesdiguières, Abbé de*. A young priest employed by Angélique as tutor for her son Florimond.

*Louis XIV\** (1638-1715), King of France from 1643, when his father, Louis XIII, died, leaving the government in the hands of his widow Anne of Austria and Cardinal Mazarin. In 1660 he married Marie-Thérèse of Spain, and after the death of Mazarin early the following year took the reins of government into his own hands. He became something of a despot, but raised France from anarchy to a world power through his skilful employment of ministers and militarists wiser than he. His Court was so brilliant, and he stimulated art and literature to such a degree that he ranks among the greatest monarchs of history and probably deserved the title of 'Sun King'. His character is best expressed in his famous remark: '*L'état, c'est moi*' (I am the State).

*Malbrant*. Fencing-master of Angélique's sons. An elderly man, he was nicknamed 'Swordthrust' because of his preoccupation with all kinds of swordplay.

*Mezzo-Morte\** (d. 1698). A pirate from Calabria, Italy, who became Lord High Admiral of Algiers. In 1683 Louis XIV sent a special expedition against him under the command of Admiral Duquesne, who captured him. Mezzo-Morte promised that he would no longer oppose

the French if he were liberated, but as soon as he had regained his freedom, he seized the Dey of Algiers and became ruler of the country under the name of Raj Husain. When the French sent another expedition against him, he fired their envoy-missionary Father Levacher out of a cannon at the attacking ships, but soon thereafter met his own end in the ensuing engagement.

*Monsieur\** (Philippe, Duc d'Orléans) (1640-1701), brother of Louis XIV and founder of the existing House of Orléans. He was married to Henriette d'Angleterre, sister of Charles II of England, whom he possibly poisoned and whom he greatly abused owing to his profligate and degenerate way of life.

*Montespan\**, *Athénaïs de* (1641-1707). Born a Rochechouart de Mortemart of Poitou, she married a minor Gascon noble, Pardaillan de Montespan. In 1668 she became Louis XIV's mistress, succeeding Louise de la Vallière, and ruled as uncrowned queen of France. Historians and biographers still debate whether she was actually involved in the 'affair of the poisons', which removed many courtiers, or practised the Black Mass with the sorcerers of Paris. She bore the King several children, and befriended Françoise Scarron, later Madame de Maintenon and the unofficial wife of Louis XIV.

*Mulai Ismail\** (1647-1727). Sultan of Morocco (1672-1727) and the counterpart in many respects of Louis XIV, he was the greatest of the Filali (or Hasanid) dynasty and a brilliant though cruel ruler. He maintained diplomatic relations with France and England, and once sent an embassy to Louis XIV to ask for the hand of the Princesse de Conti, which makes an amazing incident in history. His love of building was equal to that of Louis XIV, and he made a magnificent city out of his capital of Meknès. He cleverly unified his large empire by a system of roads and forts and, by establishing agricultural communities throughout it, redeemed it from the barren mountains and desert of which it consisted. His only major failure was his inability to recapture the outposts of Christian nations in Morocco, such as Ceuta, which he besieged for many years. He is said to have begotten 528 sons and as many daughters on his numerous wives and concubines, and to have held as many as twenty-five thousand Christian captives at one time, whom he set to work at his buildings and gardens.

*Nicholas (Calembredaine)*. First attracted to Angélique when he was a shepherd boy on her family estate in Poitou, he became her lover after he had turned robber and met her again in the Court of Miracles.

*Osman Faraji*. The Grand Eunuch of the Sultan of Morocco, Mulai Ismail.

*Paturel, Colin.* A Norman sailor and sometime pirate who, after being captured by the Moors, became the leader of the Christian slaves in Morocco.

*Philippe, Marquis du Plessis-Bellière,* Angélique's second husband, was one of the great nobles of France, dearly beloved by Louis XIV, whose Master of the Hunt he was, as well as a Marshal of France. He was killed at the siege of a town in Franche-Comté.

*Rakoczy.* An Hungarian prince and revolutionary with whom Angélique had a brief affair while he was an exile in France. His character and career are modelled on those of Francis Rakoczy II (1676-1735).

*Rescator.* A mysterious trader in contraband silver, the richest and possibly the most powerful freebooter in the Mediterranean.

*Reynie.* The Chief of Police of Paris.

*Rochat.* Angélique's deputy at Candia in Crete. Angélique had won the office of 'Consul of Candia' from another French noblewoman in a game of cards. This meant that she was entitled to a certain percentage of the duties collected in the port, but the office required no administration on her part.

*Rodogone the Egyptian.* One of the vagabonds of the Court of Miracles.

*Savary.* A little old apothecary and alchemist whom Angélique had known at Versailles and who had assisted her in her diplomatic mission for Louis XIV to Bakhtiari Bey, the ambassador of the Shah of Persia.

*Sévigné\*, Madame de* (1626-96). A famous wit of the reign of Louis XIV, whose brilliant, charming letters, written principally to her daughter who lived in Provence, are an invaluable source of information on the life of the Court and the social history of the seventeenth century in France.

*Vivonne\*, Louis Victor de Rochechouart, Duc de Mortemart et de* (1636-88), the brother of Madame de Montespan. After brilliant military service under Louis XIV in his campaigns in Holland and the Rhenish Palatinate, he was made Admiral of the Fleet, in 1669, and Marshal of France in 1675. He conducted many successful campaigns in the Mediterranean. Well educated, generous, and a patron of literature, he was famous also for his wit as a writer and conversationalist. His character, however, was not universally admired by his contemporaries, largely because of his association with Monsieur's extremely dissipated household. Madame de Sévigné despised him; the Duc de Saint-Simon praised him.

# PART ONE

## *Departure*



The coach of Police Lieutenant François Desgrez swung out of the *porte-cochère* of his hotel and slowly turned on to the pudding-shaped cobblestones of the Rue de la Commanderie in the Faubourg Saint-Germain. It was hardly a sumptuous vehicle, but it was substantial. Made of dark wood, enough golden tassels dangled from its window curtains, which were usually kept tightly drawn, to render it comparable to the equipage kept by a respectable public servant richer than he wished to appear. Two piebald horses drew it, and it sported a coachman and a footman.

The only thing Desgrez's associates held against him was his bachelorhood. Such a good-looking man, at home in the best society, ought to have by his side the daughter of some judicious, honest, frugal merchant. There were plenty of them, trained for just such a marriage by strict mothers and severe fathers, right in the very homes he was passing on his way through the Faubourg Saint-Germain. But Desgrez, charming in a stiff conventional way, seemed in no hurry to change his status. Too many bedizened women and too many suspicious characters shared his waiting-room with the highest born, and most loftily titled grandees of the realm.

The coach wheels grated across the ruts to the middle of the street, and the horses' hooves struck sparks from the stones as the coachman reined them into a straight course. The numerous pedestrians jlding in the hot dusk flattened themselves servilely against the walls of the buildings - all but one masked woman, who seemed to be waiting for the coach to catch up to her. As it drew near, she leaned into its window, wide open because of the heat.

'Lieutenant Desgrez,' she said coquettishly, 'let me ride beside you and chat for a few minutes.'

The policeman, startled out of his brooding over the outcome of a recent investigation, turned to her with anger in his face. There was no need for him to ask her to raise her visor. He had already recognised Angélique.

'You again?' he growled. 'Don't you understand plain language? I thought I had told you I never want to see you again.'

'I understood,' she said, 'but this is very, *very* important and you are the only person who can help me. I didn't want to do this, and I thought a long time before I did. But I couldn't think of another

person in the whole world who could help me but you.'

'I told you I did not want to see you again,' Desgrez repeated through clenched teeth.

Such an outburst was unusual for him. Usually he disguised his feelings in a dry, cold impassivity, which now deserted him.

Angélique had not expected such an explosion on his part. She had thought he might begin by brushing her off, for she had broken her agreement not to bother him again; but she had decided that what she had learned from the King was extraordinary enough to touch Desgrez's hard heart if he were still in love with her. She did need him. Still she was not surprised to find that he was 'not at home' on the two occasions she had called at his hôtel, and that there was little chance he would ever receive her. Hence she had waited for a propitious moment like this to approach him directly. She was convinced he would listen to her and eventually oblige her.

'It's terribly important, Desgrez,' she wheedled. 'My husband is alive. . . .'

'I told you I did not wish to see you,' Desgrez said for the third time. 'You have enough lovers to keep you busy, whether your husband is alive or dead. Now, let go of the door. The horses are about to move on.'

'I won't let go,' Angélique insisted. 'The horses can drag me over the stones before I'll let you go without listening to me.'

'Let go of the door!'

Desgrez's voice was sinister. Seizing the walking-stick beside him, he brought its pommel down hard on Angélique's fingers as they grasped the window-sill. She screamed with pain. The coach jerked forward.

Angélique had fallen on her knees. A water vendor who had been goggling at the entire incident came up to her as she struggled to her feet and began dusting off her dress.

'It's just not your night, dearie,' he said, 'so make the best of it. You can't always catch the big fish. But they do say he likes pretty girls, so you've still got a chance. You just chose the wrong time. How about a cup of water to pull yourself together? A storm's coming up and that always makes people thirsty. My water is fresh and pure. Only six sols a cup.'

Angélique walked away without answering. Desgrez's uncompromising behaviour had deeply pained her. 'It's unbelievable,' she said to herself, 'how selfish men can be.' Obviously he wanted to torture himself by consigning his love for her to total oblivion, but still he could have made one more little effort especially when she was so desperate



for someone to turn to, someone to help her out of her dilemma.

And Desgrez was the only one who could help her. He had known her since the time of Peyrac's trial, in fact, had been closely involved in it. His policeman's turn of mind could help her sort facts from fancies, find some theory to work on for further investigation. Perhaps he even knew something about this extraordinary turn of events. There were certainly plenty of mysteries and secrets carefully stowed away in the depths of his memory or filed in his locked cabinets. Furthermore, though she did not admit it to herself, she needed Desgrez to free her from the terrible burden of the secret she carried so that she would not be so wholly alone with her possibly insane hopes—flattering raptures that could easily be extinguished by the icy wind of doubt. If only she could talk with him about the past, and about the future which loomed before her like a whirlpool in which, perhaps, lurked the crowning happiness of her life.

'You know perfectly well there is something waiting for you on the horizon of your life. You are not going to stop seeking it . . .'

That was what Desgrez had told her long ago. Yet now he had just cruelly renounced her. Her mouth twisted in disappointment.

She was walking rapidly, for she had borrowed Javotte's skirt and summer shawl so as to be unnoticed in the crowd while she waited for Desgrez to leave his house. For three long hours she had stood waiting, and now—for what!

Night was falling and the streets were emptying. As she crossed the Pont-Neuf, Angélique turned around apprehensively. Two men she had noticed hanging about her house the last few days were following her. Perhaps it was merely a coincidence, but she could not understand why that red-faced loiterer who had been staring so continuously at Beaufort should have chosen this particular hour of the day for a stroll through the Faubourg Saint Germain and over the Pont-Neuf.

Probably some admirer, she thought. But it worried her. If he kept on manœuvring that way any longer, she would instruct Swordthrust Malbrant to persuade him to try his luck elsewhere.

Near the Palais de Justice she hired a sedan chair and a linkboy to bring her to within a few steps of the little door to her orchard on the Quai des Célestins. She walked along its paths, fragrant with the scent of the still green fruit that hung from the branches of the silver-potted trees, past the gothic well-head with its gargoyles, and stole up the staircase.

A single lamp was burning near the ebony and mother-of-pearl secretary in her sitting-room. With a sigh of fatigue she sank into a chair

and kicked the slippers off her aching, burning feet. She had grown quite unused to walking over uneven pavements, and to the hot thick leather of the shoes she had borrowed from her maid.

'I haven't the endurance I used to have,' she reflected, 'but if I'm going to have to travel under difficult conditions . . .'

She was plagued by this notion of setting forth, seeing herself on rough roads, poor and barefoot, as she pursued her pilgrimage of love in search of the happiness she had lost. I must go, she said to herself. But where to?

Then her thoughts returned to the documents the King had entrusted to her – those few sheets of time-stained paper, scabbed with seals and scrawled over with signatures. There lay the only concrete proof of the incredible story he had revealed to her. Whenever she thought she might have dreamed it all, she read over again their record of how Maître Arnaud de Calistère, lieutenant of the King's musketeers, had been charged by the King himself with a mission he solemnly swore to keep secret. It named the six musketeers selected to assist him – all known for their loyalty to the King and for their uncommunicative dispositions. Hence it would not be necessary to cut their tongues out as was done in olden times.

Another page, conscientiously itemised by Maître Calistère, listed the expenses incurred on his mission:

- 20 *livres* for hiring the Blue Grape wineshop on the morning of the execution.
- 30 *livres* to pay the owner, Maître Gilbert, to keep the secret.
- 10 *livres* to buy a corpse from the morgue for burning instead of the condemned man.
- 20 *livres* to silence the men who delivered the corpse.
- 50 *livres* for the tumbril and for silence.
- 10 *livres* for the hay-covered barge to carry the prisoner from Saint-Landry gate to beyond Paris.
- 10 *livres* to stop the mouths of the boatmen.
- 5 *livres* to hire bloodhounds to track down the prisoner after his escape. (Here Angélique's heart began to beat wildly.)
- 10 *livres* to silence the farmers who rented the hounds and helped drag the river.

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Total 165 *livres*

Angélique laid aside Arnaud de Calistère's meticulous accounting and scrutinised the report he had so scrupulously compiled:

' . . . Toward midnight, below Mantes, the barge on which we were transporting the prisoner stopped and tied up on the steep river bank. Each of us took a little rest. I left a guard by the prisoner, who had given no sign of life since the moment we received him from the hands of the executioner. We had had to carry him the entire length of the tunnel from the cellar of the Blue Grape to the water's edge. Since he was lying under the hay, hardly breathing . . . '

Angélique could picture his huge tortured body wrapped in the shroud-like white robe of a condemned man.

'Before dropping off to sleep I asked if he needed anything. He did not seem to hear me.'

As a matter of fact, while Maître Calistère was wrapping himself in his cloak to 'drop off to sleep', he expected to find his prisoner more dead than alive the next day. But that is not at all the way he did find him.

Angélique burst out laughing. The picture of a defeated, dying or dead Joffrey de Peyrac was incongruous to her. She would never be able to imagine him like that. Rather she kept seeing him as he must have been right up to the very end, every fibre of his senses on the alert even though his body was exhausted, every morsel of his spirit refusing to yield to death, resolved to play the game boldly till the last moment of existence. He was a miracle of will-power. She had known him to be quite capable of that, and more.

In the morning they had found only the deep impression his mighty body had made in the pile of hay. She pitied the guard who must have had to confess that watching a dying man did not require the utmost in vigilance and who, at the urging of physical exhaustion, must have yielded to the entreaties of the goddess of slumber.

'The disappearance of the prisoner is entirely inexplicable. How could a man, without enough strength to open his eyes, have slipped off a boat without attracting attention? And what could have become of him afterwards? Even if he could have managed to drag himself off the barge, how could he have escaped discovery, half-naked and in the state of exhaustion he was?'

They had immediately scoured the countryside for him, alerted the peasants, hired hounds to track him up and down the riverbank. Eventually they had concluded the prisoner had by some superhuman means slid off the barge but had been carried away by the current and, too weak to struggle against it, had drowned.

Later, however, a peasant complained that his skiff had been stolen from its moorings the night before. The lieutenant of the musketeers

did not fail to investigate this piece of evidence. The skiff had been found near Porcheville. They combed the whole district, questioned all the inhabitants as to whether any of them had seen a thin, limping man wandering about. Some said yes, and took the musketeers to a little monastery sequestered in the poplars whose abbot a few days previously had sheltered one of the lepers one still found wandering about the countryside—a pathetic creature covered with sores, his disease-ravaged face partially concealed with filthy rags. Was the leper a big man? they asked. Did he have a limp? Yes, perhaps—the monk's memory was vague. Did he have a cultivated voice, unusual for a vagrant? No, the man was dumb, his only sound being the hoarse warning call of a leper. The abbot had reminded him of his duty to seek out the nearest lazaret, and the man did not refuse. He had climbed into the work-wagon with the abbot, but had found a way to give him the slip as they were going through some woods.

They found him again near Saint-Denis on the outskirts of Paris. But was it the same leper or another? At the instigation of Arnaud de Calistère, whom the King had given extraordinary authority, all the police of Paris were alerted. For three weeks after the disappearance of the lieutenant's prisoner, the gates of Paris permitted no wagon to enter the city before its layers of hay had been prodded and poked, and no one on foot or on horseback before he had been carefully measured and examined.

The dossier Angélique was leafing through was full of reports compiled by some painstakingly literal-minded sergeant of the guard testifying that on such and such a day he had detained 'an old man with a lame leg, but who was thickset and not handsome, but not ill-favoured either . . .' or a masked nobleman, 'who turned out to be disguised because he was bent on some amatory errand and was not lame either'. *Et cetera, et cetera.*

The wandering leper had not been recognised, yet all Paris knew who he was and was in fear of him. He looked like the Devil. His face was especially frightful since he always wore a shroud or a kind of monk's cowl. A policeman caught him late one night, but had not the courage to lift that cowl, and the apparition vanished before he could all the soldiers of the watch.

Then the speculations as to the wandering leper suddenly came to an end. In the rushes by the river below Mantes, at Gassicourt, was found the body of a man who had been drowned at least a month. The corpse was in an advanced state of decay, and all that could be determined was that it was a large man.

Heaving a sigh of relief, Lieutenant Calistère remarked in a letter to the King that he had already foreseen this ending to the story, as it was the only possible one. By escaping, the man had failed to appreciate the mercy of the King who had snatched him from the flames of the stake at the last moment. God had punished him for his arrogance by condemning him to the icy waters of the river. All was, as ever, for the best.

'No! No!' protested Angélique. 'It can't be true!'

Horrified, she refused to acknowledge this painful epilogue to the story, preferring to fasten her hopes to the few lines added to it by the Bailiff of Gassicourt who had conducted the inquest on the body: 'A few shreds of a black cassock still clung to its shoulders.'

When he escaped from the barge, the prisoner was wearing only his white shroud. But Arnaud de Calistère had underlined the words in his own handwriting: 'The description of the drowned man tallies exactly with that of our prisoner. . . .'

'But what about the white shroud?' Angélique said aloud.

She sprang to the defence of her feeble hopes against these shadows of doubt. Then fear crept over her. Perhaps the soldiers had changed the prisoner's white garment for a black cassock before hauling him through the tunnel to the boat that was to carry him out of Paris.

'If only I could locate that Arnaud de Calistère or one of his men, and question him!' she said.

She searched her memory, but she had never heard his name mentioned while she was at Court. Still, it would be relatively easy to find out what had become of a former lieutenant of the King's musketeers. Fourteen years had gone by since these events. Fourteen years! How short a time it seemed, and yet since then she had lived so many lives! She had gone from the depths of poverty to the heights of wealth. She had married again. She had held the King's heart in thrall. Now all that had vanished as a dream.

A letter from Madame de Sévigné lay open on the writing-shelf of her secretary:

'For almost two weeks, my dear, we have not seen you at Versailles, and people are beginning to ask questions. No one knows what to think. The King is gloomy. What is going on? . . .'

Angélique shrugged her shoulders. True, she had left Versailles. She was never going back. Never! Phantoms swirled around her, but she ignored them, concentrating all her thoughts on her reconstruction of

a heavy barge beside the icy bank of a river on a winter's night long ago.

Thus she returned to life. She forgot her body, possessed by so many; her face, the triumph of the cosmetician's art, which could cause the King to weaken; all the marks that harsh destiny had branded upon her. She felt miraculously purified, restored to all the untrammelled innocence she had possessed at twenty—a completely new woman with eyes of emerald green, captivatingly tender and turning to *him*. . . .

'A man is asking for you.'

The white head of Swordthrust Malbrant was suddenly before her eyes.

'A man is asking for you,' he repeated.

She hesitated a moment out of surprise, suddenly aware that she must have dropped off to sleep as she sat on her footstool, her hands around her knees. By opening the little door behind the tapestries the old man must have roused her. She passed her hand over her forehead.

'What? Oh! Yes . . . a man . . . What man? What time is it?'

'Three o'clock in the morning.'

'And yet you say a man is asking for me?'

'Yes, Madame.'

'Did the gatekeeper let him in at this hour?'

'The gatekeeper had nothing to do with it. He did not come in by the door, but by a window. Sometimes I leave my window open, and this fellow came through it by way of the rain trough.'

'You're making fun of me, Malbrant. If it were a burglar, you would have taken care of him.'

'As a matter of fact, it was the other way round. This gentleman "took care" of me. Then he assured me you were expecting him, and I let myself believe him. He is surely some friend of yours, Madame. He gave me plenty of evidence to prove it.'

Angélique frowned. Here was another wild story. Then she remembered the man who had seemed to be following her the past week.

'What does he look like? Small or big? Red-faced?'

'No indeed! He seems quite a gentleman. But it's hard to say what he looks like because he's wearing a mask. His hat's pulled down over his brows and his cloak muffled up to his nose. But if you want my opinion, Madame, he is someone important.'

'And if so, why does he steal into a person's house by way of the roof! Well, go fetch him, Malbrant, but be ready to sound the alarm.'

Curious in spite of herself, she waited until the figure appeared in the doorway. Then she had no trouble recognising him.

'You!'

'Yes, it's I,' answered the voice of Desgrez.

Angélique gestured to the old man. 'You may leave us.'

Desgrez pushed back his hat, and took off his mask and his cloak. 'Whew!' he said. He took the hand she offered him and gently kissed the tips of her fingers. 'That is by way of apology for my brutality a while back. I hope I didn't hurt you too much.'

'You almost broke my fingers with that stick of yours, you naughty man. I must say I don't understand your behaviour, Monsieur Desgrez.'

'Yours is not much more understandable – or agreeable,' the officer answered. He pulled up a chair and sat astride it. He was not wearing his formal wig or his highly conventional clothes. Clad in the shabby greatcoat he wore on all his secret expeditions, and with his unkempt hair, he looked the image of a policeman.

Angélique, too, was in the garments of a poor woman, her bare feet crossed in front of her. 'Did you really have to come to see me at this hour of the night?' she asked.

'Yes, I did.'

'So you thought over your unjustified hostility to me, and couldn't wait till daylight to make amends?'

'No, that's not it at all. But since you kept saying over and over again that you needed to see me so badly, I couldn't wait till daylight.' He made a fatalistic gesture. 'Since you do not wish to understand that I have had enough of you and that I do not want even to hear your name again, I had all the more reason for coming.'

'It's terribly important, Desgrez.'

'Of course, it's important. I know you. Nothing would make you bother the police for a joke. With you, it's always something important – you're about to be murdered, or else commit suicide, or perhaps you've decided to involve the Royal Family in some fiendish scandal, or disobey the Pope. How should I know?'

'Desgrez, you have never caught me out of my depth.'

'That's what I resent. You never get involved in the farcical situations self-respecting women do. With you there's always drama afoot, but never drama on a grand scale. In your case no one has to do anything but pray he won't arrive too late. So, you see, here I am – and in time too.'

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'Desgrez, can you possibly help me one more time?'

'We shall see,' he said darkly. 'First tell me what it's all about.'

'Why did you come in through the window?'

'Now don't tell me you don't know why. Haven't you noticed that you've been followed by the police for a week?'

'Followed by the police? I?'

'Yes indeed. An accurate record has to be kept of all the comings and goings of Madame du Plessis-Bellière. There's not a cranny of Paris you've visited that you haven't been followed by two or three guardian angels. Not a letter you've written that hasn't been stolen and read with great care before being sent on to its destination. A network of guards has been woven just for you at every gate of the city. No matter what direction you choose to take, you can't go a hundred yards without being accompanied. A very high officer has to answer personally for your presence in the capital.'

'Who is it?'

'Monsieur de la Reynie's own lieutenant, a certain Desgrez. You've heard of him perhaps?'

Angélique was astonished. 'You mean *you* have been instructed to spy on me and keep me from leaving the city?'

'Exactly so. Now you may understand why in such circumstances it's been impossible for me to receive you openly. I could hardly carry you off in my coach right under the very eyes of those I had put on your trail.'

'Who gave you this undignified assignment?'

'The King.'

'The King? Why?'

'His Majesty did not take me into his confidence, but you must have some idea of why, haven't you? I know only one thing, which is that the King does not want you to leave Paris. I have made my plans accordingly. Aside from that, what can I do for you? What commands do you have for your faithful servant?'

Angélique twisted her hands nervously in her lap. So, the King did not trust her! He was not admitting she had disobeyed him, but was just keeping her near him by force until – until she did what he wanted. But that she would never do!

As Desgrez kept looking at her he was thinking that in these simple clothes of hers and her bare feet she was like a wild bird anxiously darting its eyes in every direction to find some means of escape from its captors. Already the gilded cage that imprisoned her with luxurious appointments seemed no fit place for this woman who had laid aside



her usual sumptuous raiment. Indeed she had even rid herself of her worldly mannerisms and she seemed a stranger in the atmosphere she had now created around her. Suddenly she was like a lonely little bare-foot shepherdess so far away that she touched Desgrez's heart. He brushed aside a thought that occurred to him, that she had never been made for this kind of world, everything was a mistake.

'Well, what's the matter? What do you want of your servant?' he said aloud.

In the soft light Angélique's stare wavered. 'Do you want to help me?' she repeated.

'Yes, on condition that you make your eyes behave and keep your distance. Stay where you are,' he ordered her as she started toward him. 'This is no time for pleasure. Don't tantalise me, you little devil!' Desgrez took out his pipe and dug it into his tobacco pouch. 'Go on, my dear, tell me the whole story.'

She liked his way of speaking, as if he were her confessor. It made things easier for her.

'My husband is alive,' she said.

He did not even flicker an eyelid. 'Which one? You had two, I believe, and both seem to be quite dead. One was burned at the stake, the other's head was blown off in a battle. Has there been a third?'

Angélique shook her head. 'Don't pretend not to know what I'm talking about, Desgrez. My husband is alive. He was not burned in the Place de Grève as he was condemned to be. At the last moment the King pardoned him and had him spirited away. The King himself told me so. My husband, the Comte de Peyrac, was saved from the pyre but was still considered dangerous to the safety of the kingdom, and so had to be taken secretly to a prison outside Paris. But he escaped. Look, here are the papers to prove it.'

The police officer was applying his tinder box to the bowl of his pipe. He puffed a while, then carefully put the box away before casually waving aside the dossier she was holding out to him.

'No need for me to look at it. I know what's in it.'

'You know?' Angélique echoed in bewilderment. 'Have you already been through all these papers?'

'Yes.'

'When, for heaven's sake?'

'Some years ago now. Yes, I got a little curious. I had just bought my commission as a police officer, and I thought it wise to forget a few things. No one remembered any longer that "unattractive lawyer" who had been so stupid as to get mixed up in the defence of a sorcerer con-

demned before trial. The whole affair was buried, but sometimes it would pop into my mind again. People let a few things drop. I searched. I slunk off. A policeman has ways of getting into almost any place, you know. In the end I discovered this. I read it.'

'And you never told me!' she murmured.

'No.'

As he stared at her through the haze of blue smoke he kept exhaling, she began to hate him and his loathsome way of prying into things like a sly cat. He could not be still in love with her. There was no such weakness in him. He would always be stronger than she.

'You remember, my dear,' he said at last, 'the evening when you said good-bye to me in your chocolate shop? You had just informed me you were going to marry the Marquis du Plessis-Bellière. In one of those strange intimacies that women manage you said: "Isn't it funny, Desgrez, that I can never get out of my head the hope of seeing him again some day? There are some who say it wasn't he who was burned in the Place de Grève."''

'That's the time you should have told me,' she exclaimed.

'What good would it have done? You were just on the point of gathering all the fruits of your superhuman efforts. To harvest them you had spared yourself neither hard work, nor courage, nor the lowest kinds of intrigue, nor even your own virtue. You had thrown everything into the scale to balance your ambition. You were on the brink of triumph. If I had said anything, I would have destroyed it all for you and left you with only a phantom.'

She was hardly listening to him. 'You should have told me,' she repeated. 'Think of the mortal sin you let me commit by marrying another man while my husband was still alive.'

Desgrez shrugged. 'Alive? There was always the chance he was the corpse they fished out of the river at Gassicourt. Dead by burning or dead by drowning, what difference did it make to you?'

'No!' she shouted jumping up. 'No, it's impossible!'

'What would you have done if I had told you?' Desgrez said coldly. 'You would have wrecked everything just as you are about to do now. You would have thrown away all your trump cards, all your chances, your destiny and your children's too. You would have gone off like a crazy woman in search of a shadow, a phantom, just as you are about to do now. Admit it,' he said threateningly, 'That's what you have in mind - to go searching for this husband of yours who vanished away some fourteen years ago.' He rose and stood before her. 'Where is he? How? And *why*?'

She jumped up at his last word. 'Why?'

The police officer gave her a look that pierced her soul. 'He was the Comte de Toulouse,' he said. 'But the Comte de Toulouse no longer exists. He reigned in a palace. Now he has no palace. He was the richest lord of the whole realm. He is no more the richest lord of the kingdom. His wealth has been confiscated. He was a scholar known throughout the entire world. Now he is unknown. Where could he practise his craft? What would be left of all you loved him for?'

'Desgrez, you cannot understand the love a man like him could kindle.'

'Perhaps, but I think I understand how he could enchant a woman's heart. But now that those spells of his are no more . . .'

'Don't make me think you're naïve about these things, Desgrez. You know nothing about the way a woman loves.'

'I know a little about you, though.' He put his hands on her shoulders and pivoted her around until she could see herself in the tall, gold-framed oval mirror. 'You've added years to yourself—your skin, your eyes, your soul, your body. Such a life as you've lived! All those lovers you've given yourself to . . .'

She broke away from him, her cheeks flaming, and looked him square in the face. 'Yes, I know. But that has nothing to do with the love I bear him . . . that I shall always have for him. Between us, dear Monsieur Desgrez, what would you think of a woman so blessed by nature as I who kept living alone, abandoned by everyone and in the depths of distress, who did not try to get herself out of such a state of affairs? You would say she was a moron, and you would be right. Perhaps I seem like a cynic to you, but if I had to today, I would not hesitate one instant to use my power over men to get what I want. What, did any of the men—all the men—who came after him really mean to me? Nothing, absolutely nothing!' She kept staring at him boldly and wickedly. 'Nothing, you hear. Even now I feel toward them only something very close to hatred. Toward *all* of them!'

Desgrez was contemplating his fingernails. 'I am not entirely convinced by your cynicism,' he said. A deep sigh escaped him. 'I recall a certain little Gutter-Poet . . . And as for the handsome Marquis Philippe du Plessis-Bellièvre, wasn't there a little tenderness on your part somewhere there . . . a rather warm affection?'

She shook her head so violently her hair flew. 'Ah, Desgrez, you can't understand. A woman has to have her illusions. She has to try to live. A woman needs so desperately to love and to be loved. The memory of him has always stayed with me like a piercing sorrow.' She glanced

down at her hand. 'In the cathedral at Toulouse he slipped a golden ring on my finger. Perhaps it is the only thing left of our life together, but it binds me to him. I am his wife, and he is my husband. I will always be his, and he mine. That's why I shall search for him. The world is wide, but if he still lives in some corner of it I will find him if I have to tramp the rest of my life.'

Her voice caught in her throat as she saw herself plodding along a broiling hot road, old and despairing.

Desgrez took her in his arms. 'There, there,' he soothed. 'I've been too hard on you, my darling, but you've been hard on me too.' He pressed her to him until she cried out. Then he released her and began to puff on his pipe again abstractedly.

'Good!' he said after a moment. 'Since you've made up your mind to indulge in this foolishness, to destroy your fortune and perhaps your very life, and since no one can stop you, what are you planning to do?'

'*I don't know*,' said Angélique. Then she thought for a bit. 'I had thought,' she said, 'I would try to find that Calistère, the former lieutenant of the musketeers. He is the only one, if he has any memory left, who could help us eliminate the doubt hovering over the drowned man of Gassicourt.'

'It's been done,' Desgrez said brusquely. 'I located that officer, gave him a good meal and found ways to refresh his memory. Finally he acknowledged that the affair of the drowned man of Gassicourt had reached a point where it was advantageous for him to bring to an end an investigation that was putting him in a bad light. But he admitted there were only very vague points of resemblance between the corpse and the escaped prisoner.'

'Oh, yes!' Angélique gasped hopefully. 'Then the trail of the wandering leper would be a good one to follow.'

'Who can say?'

'We must go to Pontoise and question the monks of the little abbey where he was seen.'

'That has been done.'

'How so?'

'Well, in a manner of speaking, I took advantage of an inquest that brought me into that region to ring the bell at the abbey.'

'Desgrez, you are an astonishing man!'

'Stay where you are,' he said rudely. 'My visit did not shed much light on the case. The abbot could not tell me much more than he had told the soldiers when they questioned him. But a lay brother, the

monastery physician, remembered a detail or two when I found him grubbing in his herb garden. He had pitied the poor wretch enough to want to put some salve on his sores, and had gone to the barn where the exhausted vagrant seemed so sound asleep he thought him dead. "He was not a leper," the doctor told me. "I lifted the rags from his face and found it not eaten away but merely badly scarred."

'So it was he, then, wasn't it? It was he! But what was he doing at Pontoise? Wouldn't he have come back to Paris? How stupid!'

'The same kind of stupidity a man like him was capable of committing for a woman like you.'

'But they lost track of him at the city gates.' Angélique rifled through the papers feverishly. 'Still, they say he was recognised in Paris.'

'That seems impossible to me. He could not have got in. For three weeks after his escape the strictest orders were given to watch all the gates. Then the discovery of the corpse at Gassicourt and Arnaud de Calistère's investigations put an end to the excitement. The dossier was closed. To make absolutely sure, I rummaged around a little in the archives afterward. Nothing about the affair appeared again.'

A heavy silence fell upon them.

'Is that all you know, Desgrez?'

The police officer paced the floor for a while before he replied: 'No.'

He kept gnawing the stem of his pipe as he stared at her. 'No!' he growled between his teeth.

'What is it? Tell me!'

'Well, here it is . . . three years or so ago I had a visitor, a young priest with leaden eyes sunk in a waxen face, like those fellows who haven't the slightest inspiration yet are determined to reform the world. He wanted to know whether I might be the same person as the Desgrez who in 1661 had been appointed defence attorney in the trial of the Comte de Peyrac. He had searched for me in vain among my colleagues in the Palais de Justice, and he had had considerable difficulty recognising me in the cast-off clothes of a dreary jailer. After I had assured him I was the same Desgrez he was looking for, he told me he was Father Antoine and belonged to the Order founded by Monsieur Vincent. He had been the prison chaplain, and in that capacity had accompanied the Comte de Peyrac to the stake.'

Suddenly Angélique saw before her eyes again the outlines of the priest who sat hunched before the executioner's blaze like a half-frozen cricket.

'In a roundabout way he asked me if I knew what had become of the

Comte de Peyrac's wife. I said I did, but that I would like to know who was so interested in a woman whose name everyone had forgotten. In some embarrassment he said it was he himself. He had often thought of how sad and forlorn she must be, and had prayed for her. He hoped life had been merciful to her at last. I don't know why, but there was something in his protestations of interest that sounded false. In my business you can often detect a touch of insincerity in such embarrassment. Still, I told him what I knew.'

'What did you tell him, Desgrez?'

'The truth. That you had indeed been relieved of hardship, that you had married the Marquis du Plessis-Bellière, and that you were then one of the most envied women in the Court of France. Curiously enough, instead of pleasing him, this information seemed to alarm him. Perhaps he thought you were doomed to perdition, for I let him understand you were about to supplant Madame de Montespan in the King's affections.'

In despair Angélique exclaimed: 'Oh, why did you have to tell him that? You're a monster!'

'It was the truth, wasn't it? Your second husband was then quite alive, and your star was soaring in the eyes of the world. Then he asked me what had become of your sons. I told him they were in good health and were also doing well at Court in the Dauphin's household. Then, as he was about to leave, I said to him point-blank: "You must remember that execution very vividly. Such sleight of hand doesn't happen very often." He jumped. "What do you mean?" he said. "I mean," I replied, "that the condemned man bowed himself out at the last minute while you were blessing some anonymous cadaver. You must have been rather upset when you noticed the substitution." "I swear I never noticed it then. . . ." he said. Then I thrust my face right into his. "And when you *did* notice it, Father . . . ?"

'He turned as white as his hands. "I don't know what you're getting at," he said, trying to get out of the trap. "Yes, you do know," I said. "You know as well as I that the Comte de Peyrac did not die at the stake. And that hardly anyone else knows it. No one paid you to hold your tongue. You weren't in on the plot. But you know. Who told you?"

'He continued to play dumb. Then he left.'

'And you let him go? You shouldn't have, Desgrez! You should have forced him to talk. You should have threatened him, tortured him, compelled him to reveal who had told him and who had sent him. Who was it? Who?'

'How would that have changed things?' said Desgrez. 'You were already Madame du Plessis-Bellière, weren't you?'

Angélique put her hands to her head. Desgrez would not have told her of this incident if he had not thought it important. Desgrez was thinking the same thing she was: somewhere behind the unexpected appearance of this prison chaplain lurked the presence of Angélique's first husband. What was the hiding place from which he had dispatched this messenger? How had he got in touch with him?

'We must follow the trail of this priest,' she said. 'It will be easy enough.'

Desgrez smiled. 'You would make a fine policeman,' he said. 'I will spare you the trouble. For several years now he has been the chaplain in the galleys at Marseilles.'

It would be easy for her to find this Father Antoine again, she thought. The priest would certainly confide in her the name of the mysterious person who had sent him to Desgrez to inquire the fate of Madame de Peyrac. Perhaps he would even know where this unknown character was. Her eyes glistened, and she kept biting her lip as plans raced through her mind.

Desgrez surveyed her with an ironic glance. 'Providing you can get out of Paris,' he said in answer to the thoughts he could read so easily on her face.

'You wouldn't stop me, would you, Desgrez?'

'My dear child, it is my duty to stop you. Don't you know that when accept an assignment I am like a dog with a criminal's coat-tails in its teeth? I am prepared to give you all the information that may interest you, but don't count on me to give you a key to the open fields.'

Angélique whirled around to face the police officer, her face suffused with tender pleading. 'Desgrez! My old friend!'

His youthful face grew hard. 'The King himself pledged me to keep my eye on you. I don't take such responsibilities lightly.'

'Yet you say you are my friend.'

'In so far as that does not interfere with my duty to the King.'

The realisation of his duplicity swept over Angélique like a burning wave. She began to hate Desgrez again as she had always hated him. She knew he was so scrupulously single-minded as far as his work was concerned that he could erect impenetrable barriers in her way. Once he had snared his prey, he always ended by destroying it. He could confine her like a jailor. No one escaped from him.

How could you accept this revolting assignment when you knew it was directed against me? I will never forgive you!'

'I admit it rather pleased me to be able to prevent you from doing something foolish.'

'Don't intrude into my life,' she shouted. 'Oh, how I loathe you and all your kind! You make me vomit, you and all the rest like you — spies, torturers, lackeys fawning on any master who'll throw you a bone to gnaw!'

Desgrez relaxed and began to laugh. He never liked her so much as when rage exhumed from the deep tomb of luxurious living in which she had buried that secret episode of her life when she was the Marquise of the Angels, the character she had first shown him in the Paris underworld.

'Listen, my dear . . .' He took her by the chin and raised her face to his. 'I could have refused that assignment, even though the King entrusted me with it because of my reputation. He was not unaware that if you took it into your head to flee, the whole Paris police force would have to be mobilised to stop you. I could have refused, but he spoke to me with such concern about you, so much anxiety, as man to man. . . . And, as I just told you, I decided to accept because I could keep you from once again destroying your whole existence.' His features softened, and he gazed tenderly at the face he held between his hands. 'Poor dear foolish little thing,' he murmured, 'don't hold it against your old friend Desgrez. I want to spare you this disastrous, dangerous undertaking. You risk losing everything and gaining nothing. And the King's anger will know no bounds; you can defy him just so long. Listen to me, Angélique, poor little Angélique. . . .'

Never before had he spoken to her with such gentleness, as if she were a child he was preventing from harming itself. She would have liked to hide her face on his shoulder and weep there quietly.

'Promise me,' he said, 'promise me not to do anything rash, and in turn I will promise you to start things moving that may help you in your search. Just promise me.'

She shook her head. She wanted to comply, but she distrusted the King and she distrusted Desgrez. They would always be trying to restrain her, imprison her. How they would have liked her to forget and agree. She distrusted herself, too. Some day she would get tired of fighting and yield to cowardice and say to herself: What's the use? The King would entreat her favours again. She was so alone in the face of all these forces allied against her to prevent her from finding her true love.

'Promise me,' Desgrez kept insisting.

Again she shook her head.



'Stubborn as a mule!' he said with a sigh. 'Well, from here on, it's a test of which of us is the stronger. So, good luck, Marquise of the Angels!'

Angélique tried to get to sleep in spite of the dawn which was whitening the windows, but she could not drift completely off and remained in a state of suspended animation, her body relaxed but her mind racing. She was trying to trace the mysterious wanderings of the leper, conjuring up the personality of her husband behind that solitary soul and thinking with horror that she herself might have seen him plodding over the roads of the Ile-de-France on his way to Paris. It was this last detail that, so far as she was concerned, spoiled the illusion. How could an escaped prisoner, knowing he was being pursued and that every detail about him was known, have been so bold as to return to the wasps' nest that was Paris? Joffrey de Peyrac would not have been so stupid as to do a silly thing like that.

Yet he might, Angélique reflected; it would be like him. She tried to guess what would have been in his mind. Would he have come back to Paris to look for her? No, that was too foolish. In Paris, the huge city that had condemned him, he would find no friend, no place of refuge. His house in Saint-Paul, the beautiful mansion he had built in honour of Angélique, had been confiscated. She remembered the many trips he had made from Aquitaine to the capital to supervise the workmen himself. Would Joffrey de Peyrac, with a price on his head, have conceived of taking refuge in that house? Stripped of everything, he might have intended to search for gold and jewels he had possibly hidden away in places known only to him.

The more she pondered this, the more likely it seemed to her. Joffrey de Peyrac was quite capable of risking everything to get possession of his wealth again. With all that money he could protect himself, whereas naked and in dire want he would have to wander helplessly. The peasants would throw rocks at him and some day one would betray him. But with a handful of gold he could gain his freedom. He knew where to put his hands on that gold in his Hôtel de Beauteillis, every nook and cranny of which he loved.

As she followed this line of reasoning Angélique persuaded herself that it was probable. She recalled his often repeated, rather scornful, maxim: 'Gold can do everything.' The young King's ambition had proved an exception to that rule, but it still held. With a little gold the wretch would cease to be defenceless. He must have come back to

Paris, she was sure now, must have come here. At that time the King had not yet laid his heavy hand on everything, had not yet offered the house to the Prince de Condé. It stood empty like an accursed dwelling, with great wax seals stuck on the doors, watched over only by a terror-stricken gatekeeper and an old Basque lackey who had not known where to flee to.

Angélique's heart began to thump wildly. Suddenly she was on the track of certainty.

'I've seen him myself. . . . Yes, I have seen him again in the lower gallery. . . . I have seen him. It was one night after the execution. I heard the noise in the gallery and recognised his footsteps. . . .'

So the old Basque lackey had said one evening as he leaned on the rim of the medieval well-head at the bottom of the garden when she encountered him just after she had regained possession of the Hôtel de Beautreillis.

'Who wouldn't recognise his footsteps? The footsteps of the Great Crippie of Languedoc! I lit my lantern, and when I came to the turn in the gallery, there he was, leaning against the chapel door. He turned towards me. . . . I recognised him the way a dog recognises its master, but I did not see his face. He was wearing a mask. Suddenly he vanished into the wall, and I did not see him again. . . .'

Angélique had fled in terror, refusing to listen to the prattle of this almost senile creature who thought he had seen a ghost.

She sat up in bed and jangled the bell violently. Janine appeared, the affected redhead who had taken Thérèse's place. She sniffed suspiciously and disdainfully at the fumes of tobacco Desgrez had left behind him, and inquired what Madame wished.

'Go get that old lackey right away . . . what's his name? . . . Oh, yes, Pascalou . . . Grandpa Pascalou.'

The maid raised her eyebrows.

'You know him perfectly well,' Angélique said. 'A very old man who draws the well water and brings in the firewood.'

Janine looked at her with the resigned expression of one who does not understand but who is going to do her duty. A few minutes later she returned to say that Grandpa Pascalou had been dead for two years.

'Dead?' echoed Angélique. 'Dead! Oh lord, how awful!'

Janine could not understand how her mistress could be so upset at learning of an event which two years before she had completely ignored. Angélique kept Janine to help her dress. She got into her clothes abstractedly. So the poor old man had died and taken his secret with

him. She was at Court in those days and had not even been present to hold the hand of her faithful servant on his deathbed. Now she was paying dearly for neglecting that duty. His words were etched into her memory with letters of fire: 'He was leaning against the chapel door. . . .'

Hurrying down the stairs, she sped along under the graceful arches of the gallery tinged with the pale reflections of the stained-glass windows, and opened the chapel door. It was a sort of oratory, with two Cordovan leather faldstools, and a little green marble altar topped with a splendid painting by a Spanish artist. The place reeked of incense and candle grease. Angélique remembered that when the Abbé de Lesdiguières was in Paris he said Mass there. She knelt down.

'Oh God,' she said aloud, 'I have committed many sins, but I beseech you, oh God, I entreat you . . .'

She could not find anything else to say.

He had come there one night. But how could he have got into the hôtel? How, for that matter, could he have got into Paris? What could he have been looking for in that oratory?

Angélique let her eyes roam around the little sanctuary. All the furnishings dated from the time of the Comte de Peyrac. The Prince de Condé had not disturbed a thing. Apart from the Abbé de Lesdiguières and a little page who served him as altar boy, few persons had ever been inside it.

If there were a hiding place in that oratory, the secret could have been kept well enough. Angélique got to her feet and began to search diligently. She ran her finger into every crevice of the carved altar in the hope of locating some hidden spring. She studied every detail of the bas-relief, tapped every enamelled tile of the floor, then the wood panelling that covered the walls. Her patience was ultimately rewarded. Towards the end of the morning it seemed to her that a place on the wall behind the altar gave a hollow sound. She lit a candle and scrutinised it in the light of the flame. Cleverly disguised in a carved moulding were the outlines of a keyhole. It was there!

Feverishly she strove to find the trick of opening it, but she had to give up. With the help of a knife and a key which she wore on a chain at her waist, however, she managed to crack the woodwork. A hole appeared. She thrust her hand into it and found a casket that she yanked into the light. Since there was no point in trying to unlock it, she prised the lid open. The casket was empty.

Angélique clutched the dusty little box to her bosom. 'He did come! He took the gold and the jewels. God was watching over him. God has preserved him!'

But then what? Enriched by the fortune he had recovered at the peril of his life, what had become of the Comte de Peyrac?

### CHAPTER THREE

When Angélique decided to go to Saint-Cloud to fetch Florimond, she discovered that Desgrez's warnings were in earnest. As she got into her coach she gave scant attention to the 'admirer' whose ruddy face had glowed under her windows for some three days, and she paid no heed to the two gentlemen who emerged from a neighbouring wineshop to dog her heels as she drove through the streets. But she had hardly passed the Saint-Honoré gate than a squadron of armed guardsmen surrounded her carriage and a young officer politely requested her to return to Paris.

'The King's orders, Madame.'

When she objected, he showed her a writ countersigned by La Reynie, the Prefect of Police, instructing them not to let Madame du Plessis-Bellière leave the city.

'When I think it's Desgrez who's in charge of this!' she thought. 'He could have helped me, but now he won't. He will give me all possible information about my husband's disappearance, and all kinds of advice, but he will also do all he can to obey the King's orders.'

She clenched her fists and gritted her teeth as she ordered the coachman to turn the horses around. This interference with what she wished to do aroused all her fighting instincts. Joffrey de Peyrac, helpless and unarmed though he was, had managed to get into Paris. Well, she would manage to get out this very day!

She sent a messenger to Saint-Cloud, and shortly after Florimond arrived with his tutor, who told her that in accordance with her instructions he had begun negotiations for the sale of Florimond's position. Monsieur de Loane wanted it for his nephew and was offering a good price. 'We shall see about that,' Angélique said. She did not want to go away and draw down the wrath of the King until she had taken all precautions for the safety of her children.

'Why should I sell my appointment?' Florimond asked. 'Have you got some better job for me? Am I going back to Versailles? I was

getting on very well at Saint-Cloud. Even Monsieur noticed what a good job I was doing.'

Charles-Henri welcomed him with shouts of joy. He worshipped his elder brother, and Florimond returned his affection. Every time he came to Paris, Florimond would take him in hand, give him piggy-back rides, let him play with his sword. Florimond went into raptures again over Charles-Henri's good looks.

'Isn't he the handsomest child in the world, Mama? He should be the Dauphin instead of the nitwit who is.'

'Better not let anyone hear you say that, Florimond,' warned the Abbé de Lesdiguières.

Angélique took her eyes from her two sons – Charles-Henri, so fair and pink and plump, gazing with adoring blue eyes at the dark-complexioned Florimond. Whenever she looked at the curly head of her son by Philippe, she felt strangely helpless and regretful. Why had she ever entered into that marriage? Joffrey de Peyrac had sent an emissary to seek her out, and had learned from him that she had remarried – a shocking situation from which there was no escape. God should not have let such a thing happen!

She took pains to conceal the preparations for her departure. She would send Charles-Henri and Barbe, his nurse, with the other servants to Plessis in Poitou. Even in anger, the King would not revenge himself on the child and the property of his former marshal. But for Florimond she had other, more oblique plans. 'The King will probably be very angry with me,' she said to herself by way of reassurance. 'But how can he object to my taking a little trip to Marseilles? I'll come back. . . .'

In order to divert suspicions and give some proof of her compliance, she summoned her brother Gontran, saying that at last she had found time to have her children's portraits painted. While she was struggling with her account books so as to leave all her affairs in order, she heard Florimond inventing diversions to keep his little brother quiet.

'Little angel with the smile of a cherub, you are a darling. Little glutton, fat as a priest, you are a darling,' he kept reciting in a parody of the litany.

Then she heard the voice of the Abbé de Lesdiguières. 'Florimond, you should not make fun of such things. You have far too irreverent an attitude. It disturbs me.'

Paying no attention to him, Florimond went on chanting: 'Little

woolly lamb browsing on sweetmeats, you are a darling. Little will-o-the-wisp, full of mischief, you are a darling. . . .'

Charles-Henri was laughing uproariously. Gontran was grumbling as usual, and the blond and dark heads of Angélique's children were taking form on the canvas. Florimond de Peyrac, Charles-Henri du Plessis-Bellière - each a reflection of the two men she had loved.

One evening Florimond came to Angélique as she was sitting before the fire. 'Mother,' he said directly, 'what is happening? I don't think you are the King's mistress any more, the way he keeps you doing penance in Paris.'

'Florimond!' exclaimed Angélique in some confusion. 'What business is it of yours?'

Florimond knew his mother's volatile nature, and took care not to fall foul of it. He pulled up a footstool and sat at her feet, lifting his dark shining eyes up to hers in a way he knew well was disarming and irresistible.

'Aren't you the King's mistress?' he repeated with an innocent smile.

Angélique wondered whether she should not end the discussion then and there with a smart slap, but she restrained herself for the time being. Florimond had no ulterior motive. He was asking the same question that everyone in Court was, from the first gentleman down to the last page, namely, what would be the result of the duel between Madame de Montespan and Madame du Plessis-Bellière? But since the latter was his own mother, he was more interested than most, especially since the rumours of her high position in the royal favour had given him considerable prestige among his colleagues. These embryonic courtiers were already training themselves in intrigue and so endeavoured to win his friendship. 'My father says your mother can get the King to do anything she wants him to,' young d'Aumale remarked to him. 'You're in luck! Your career is all set. Just don't forget your old friends. I've always been on your side, now haven't I?'

Florimond carried his head high, pretending he was another Father Joseph, the unobtrusive influential adviser of Richelieu. He promised Bernard de Chateauroux that he could be Admiral of the Fleet, and Philippe d'Aumale that he could be Minister of War. But now, here was his mother dragging him out of Monsieur's household, talking of selling his post as page to the little princesses, and living herself in retirement in Paris, far from the Court of Versailles.

'Have you displeased the King? Why?'

Angélique laid her hand on the boy's smooth forehead, parting the thick dark ringlets that tumbled about his head. She felt the same melancholy that had oppressed her the day Cantor had asked permission to go off to the wars, the same shock all mothers sense when their children suddenly become persons in their own right, thinking their own thoughts.

She replied to Florimond's question softly: 'Yes, I have displeased the King, and he is very cross with me.'

He knitted his brows in imitation of the distraught and anxious expressions he had seen on the faces of courtiers in disgrace. 'What a blow! What's going to become of us? I bet it's that whore Montespan's doing. That bitch!'

'Florimond, what language!'

Florimond shrugged. That was the way they talked in the royal antechambers. Suddenly he seemed resigned, as if he were facing the facts with the philosophical outlook of one who had seen plenty of houses of cards rise to great heights and then collapse in ruin.

'I hear you're going on a trip.'

'Who told you that?'

'I just heard.'

'What a bore! I don't like everyone to know my plans.'

'I won't tell a soul, I promise. But just the same I should like to know what you intend to do about me now that everything's so topsy-turvy. Are you going to take me with you?'

She had thought of taking him, and then had decided against it. The whole undertaking was in the lap of the gods. She did not even know how she was going to get out of Paris, or what information she could get from Father Antoine in Marseilles, or in what direction it might turn her. A child, even so sharp a one as Florimond, might well prove a liability.

'Now let's be reasonable, my boy. What I am going to propose to you may not sound very attractive, but the time has come for you to get some knowledge into that donkey head of yours. I'm going to turn you over to your Jesuit uncle, who has agreed to enter you in one of his Order's colleges in Poitou. The Abbé de Lesdiguières will go with you, and will continue as your counsellor and guide while I'm away.'

She had indeed gone to Father Raymond de Sancé and entreated him to take care of Florimond if need be, and to see to his education.

As she had expected he would, Florimond pouted. For a long moment he brooded, frowning. Angélique put her arm around his shoulders to